

Make Me Care About...

Make Me Care About...Friend Circles

Podcast episode five transcript

Jen Hatmaker: You may not know that I have five whole kids. It's a huge number. Not only do I have five kids in my house all the time, I have their friends in my house all at the time. I am a bonus mom to I can't even count how many extra kids. I absolutely love having my house overrun by all this chattering and camaraderie and this boisterous behavior. I'm really excited about today's conversation because, Abigail, you are going to help us find yet another reason to care about our kids' friend circles.

Abigail Hiller: Yeah, so it turns out that the biggest factor that shapes kids access to the American dream lies in their social networks. When kids from low income families grow up in communities with more friendships between people with high and low incomes, then they're more likely to earn more themselves when they're adults.

Jen Hatmaker: Created in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this is Make Me Care About. I'm Jen Hatmaker, and with me is Abigail Hiller, research translation manager at Opportunity Insights. Today we are going to talk about our kids' friends and why this even matters.

Abigail Hiller: Hi Jen. Good to see you.

Jen Hatmaker: Same. You too. Welcome. Can you just walk me through a real life example? Let's say there are two kids from different economic backgrounds who become friends in elementary school. What are both of their outcomes like in high school, in college, in career?

Abigail Hiller: Sure. I think that you can think about the concrete impact of these friendships in terms of milestones. Say you're a kid in elementary school, you're a low income kid, maybe your parents are working class and your high income friend is applying to charter schools or making different decisions about high school. That's one place where access to information might shape your norms.

Or you're a student in high school, you're high income and you have a low income friend. Maybe you're giving them information about how you're applying to college, or you're simply chatting more about your college applications. That would probably influence your friend to at least explore something similar.

In college too, if your parents and your parents' friends are holding more working class jobs, maybe exposure to someone who's a doctor or a lawyer is going to show you what's possible for yourself and inspire you to pursue a similar avenue.

Jen Hatmaker: Let's say they hadn't become friends. What do you see now as their more likely futures?

Abigail Hiller: These connections aren't destiny, but if you are in a low income position and you're relatively isolated, you're going to have less access to information, less people exhibiting those

behaviors for you to follow yourself. Your outcomes are more likely to be relatively limited compared to someone who would have those friendships.

Jen Hatmaker: Are there any specific settings or environments where cross class friendships are more likely?

Abigail Hiller: Yeah, so the six most common groups where people make their friends are high schools, colleges, churches, neighborhoods, workplaces and recreation groups.

Jen Hatmaker: Okay.

Abigail Hiller: Of those groups, you're right that there's a lot of variation in people's likelihood of forming those friendships. The most likely place is churches and the least likely place is neighborhoods. In other words, low income people are much more likely to befriend a high income person that they meet in church than someone they meet in their neighborhood.

Jen Hatmaker: That makes perfect sense to me. As you were talking, I was just doing a Rolodex of all my closest friendships at my age, at age 48, and I met every single one of them in one of those places. Those are the environments that mostly make up a human life.

Abigail, that's the where, can you talk to us about how those connections are actually made?

Abigail Hiller: Yeah. Within those settings we find that there are kind of two necessary ingredients. The first is simply exposure. You could imagine a school that's attended solely by high income students and a school that's attended solely by low income students. In that setting, there's really low chance of cross class friendships forming.

The second condition is called *friending bias*. It's the likelihood that high and low income people become friends with each other when they're in the same setting.

Jen Hatmaker: Okay.

Abigail Hiller: You might not be surprised to learn that we're more likely to befriend people who share a similar background to us. How can we overcome that bias?

Jen Hatmaker: You know what, I've never actually heard that term *friending bias*, but as you describe it, I know that it's true because, well, I mean I'm thinking about my friend group and basically my best friends and I are carbon copies of each other. I'm thinking about my kid. My kids are actually better at this. They've got really deep friendships from all kinds of categories, including socioeconomic differences. I think that's largely because of both the school district that we live in and even the neighborhood that we live in. We live in a really old neighborhood and it's kind of all over the place in terms of who our neighbors are. They are actually better at this than I am, but there's still just a ton of work to do. How do you suggest that we reduce *friending bias*?

Abigail Hiller: One thing that I think is really promising is that the same person exhibits really different *friending patterns* depending on where they are. You're much more likely to see a cross class friendship between the same two people when they meet in a church versus when they meet

in their neighborhood. There are a lot of architects and urban planners who are making design changes to public spaces and buildings, aimed at increasing those connections as well.

Jen Hatmaker: How exactly do friendships with a higher income kid help lower income kids escape poverty?

Abigail Hiller: That's a good question. We hypothesize that there are kind of three main channels by which these friendships help kids. The first is kind of by shaping their career aspirations and norms. Say if you're growing up in a family where your parents are computer scientists, you have a sense of what's possible there and your aspirations are shifted.

The second channel is providing people information about things like jobs and schools. I can remember when I was in high school, my friends coming back from the guidance office with application papers and just simply sitting next to someone that was filling out those scholarship applications made me more likely to fill them out myself, and I hope I had the same impact on someone.

The third is providing connections to internships, job opportunities. I don't know about you, but my first job came through a referral. It was simply someone that lived in my hometown. I think a lot of people's first jobs are kind of similar, and that really sets you on a path for the rest of at least your early career. You can see where a low income person with more access to high income people would have also more connections.

Jen Hatmaker: This makes sense from an individual perspective. What then is the long-term effect here for the broader public, Abigail?

Abigail Hiller: In my eyes, there are kind of three main effects. The first is that I think increasing the number of cross class friendships that we have is desirable in its own right.

Jen Hatmaker: Right.

Abigail Hiller: There's a lot of widespread concern about how fragmented our society is.

The second is that these friendships benefit low income kids. I think we should think of those benefits as benefiting us all because the more kids that are moving up in the income distribution, that bolsters our economy and that's a good thing for all of us.

Jen Hatmaker: Absolutely.

Abigail Hiller: The third is that these cross class friendships might actually help us to overcome other systemic hurdles that impact kids' lives.

Jen Hatmaker: Huh. When you say systemic hurdles, what do you mean?

Abigail Hiller: I mentioned earlier that kids who grow up in these more socially integrated communities tend to do well even in the face of hurdles like poverty or segregation by race or income. That kind of suggests that the reason that those forces hold kids back is because they do

impede these cross class connections. If we could find a way to foster economic connectedness even in the face of those challenges, then we could help more kids excel.

Jen Hatmaker: Abigail, that is really helpful and absolutely true in my life. When I sort of think back, having all kinds of kids in my home has deeply enriched our life, our family, and our story. I love that we are having this conversation.

This is Make Me Care About. I'm Jen Hatmaker, and if you're thinking about how you might help your kids expand their friendships, that's coming up after the break.

This is Make Me Care About. I'm Jen Hatmaker and with me is Abigail Hiller, research translation manager at Opportunity Insights. Today, Abigail's telling us all about the importance of our kids' friend circles.

Abigail, you've mentioned it very briefly a couple of times, but can you tell me more about the actual research that led up to this study?

Abigail Hiller: It's long been hypothesized that social capital are kind of the nature of our friend groups and our social circles might play a key role, but it's been really hard to measure. Fortunately, we got access to anonymized data from Facebook, which allowed us to construct these estimates for the first time, and indeed we did find that social capital is a key driver of those differences.

Jen Hatmaker: In this study, obviously you refer to social capital in terms of economic connectedness, but are there other kinds of social capital?

Abigail Hiller: There are a lot of other kinds of social capital, and really economic connectedness was our way to define one type of social capital. You could measure something similar across different racial or ethnic groups or even different age groups or people that speak different languages.

We also constructed estimates of cohesiveness, so like to what extent, Jen, if you have a friend, am I mutual friends with that person as well.

A third type is civic engagement. How common are civic organizations and to what extent do people engage with the organizations in their community?

Jen Hatmaker: I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about what exactly is upward mobility?

Abigail Hiller: You can think of upward mobility as basically comparing your own income to that of your parents. Specifically upward mobility refers to the likelihood that you're going to grow up and have a higher income than they did.

Jen Hatmaker: Okay, so what impact do cross class friendships have on high income people?

Abigail Hiller: That's a really important question and one that needs a lot of future study. What I can say is that in a given neighborhood with fewer of these connections and more of these connections, high income kids tend to do the same, while low income kids benefit a lot.

Jen Hatmaker: Let's talk about it from a family standpoint. If I'm a parent who is relatively financially stable, how should I be encouraging my children to make friends across class lines?

Abigail Hiller: If your student simply isn't around other high income or rather other low income students, then you might need to help your kid participate in organizations where they are going to gain that exposure. Or by contrast, say if there is a high degree of cross class exposure in your school, but a high degree of friending bias as well, then you might need to focus on ways of addressing that bias.

Jen Hatmaker: Okay. Someone's listening, they're interested, they want to sort of analyze their environment. Where should they start?

Abigail Hiller: They can start by looking at the data. All of the estimates of social capital that I described here are publicly available at socialcapital.org, and you can kind of see whether A, your community has a high degree of economic connectedness, whether that economic connectedness is translating into more upward mobility for kids who grew up in your neighborhood. Maybe if economic connectedness isn't low, you can assess whether that's due to exposure or kind of segregation or whether it's due to friending bias. Hopefully that gives people a good starting place for making some real change in their own communities.

Jen Hatmaker: Perfect. Abigail, thank you.

Abigail Hiller: Yeah. Thank you, Jen.

Jen Hatmaker: I have loved this conversation, you guys. I mean, for a lot of reasons. As a mom, as a leader, as hopefully a good neighbor, I think most of us are wanting to build a better world, and this is a super easy way to do it. Some of those six environments where we make friends, where our kids make friends, we get to choose some of those. That is a really simple response to this incredible discussion, and this is wildly wonderful for literally everybody involved.

To learn more about Abigail's work, check out the show notes you guys. If you like this episode, follow the show and share this episode with a friend.

Make Me Care About is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum of Magnificent Noise. Our production staff includes Sabrina Farhi, Hiwote Getaneh, Julia Natt, and Kristin Mueller. Our executive producer is Eric Nuzum, and I'm the host, Jen Hatmaker.